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The Gadgetress: Year in Review



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The Gadgetress

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This has been a major year for gadgets, with the launch of high-definition DVD players, two game consoles, quad-core computer chips and a music player from Microsoft.

In 2006, we also saw high-definition TVs on their way to becoming mainstream and 50-inch plasmas break the \$2,000 barrier.

But first, here's a look at how the Gadgetress year ended up. There were 48 reviews, with help from on-staff audio enthusiast Matt Degen from Squeeze OC. The majority, or 73 percent, got a rating of 3 or 4 (out of 5). I consider a 3 to be adequate because, for the most part, it works. A 4 means I was very impressed but there's always room for improvement. No one got a 5 for the second year in a row. Maybe I should nix the 5, but it does give gadget makers something to strive for.

FAVORITES

Best new reason to have a cell phone

A tie between two Orange County products. Vemail, from Huntington Beach's Voice Genesis, and **VZ Navigator** from **Networks in Motion** in Irvine. Vemail keeps the price of checking e-mail on a cell phone to \$4.99 a month by using voice minutes, instead of pricey data plans. VZ Navigator provides street directions and so much more on a cell phone for \$2.99 a day or \$9.99 a month. The bad news is Vemail is only available to Verizon and AllTell users, and VZ Navigator is for Verizon customers only.

Geek-chic gadget

The Nokia 7380 cell phone (look up) isn't so user friendly, but the look and feel is just so geek chic, I'm giving it the design award for best space-age appeal. The 7380 has no numbers or obvious screen. But when you need to dial, the mirrored exterior reveals the tiny LCD screen and the circular knob offers controls. And if the original \$650 price was a bit much, it's now down to \$400 at nokiusa.com/phones/fashion/lamour.

Best reason to buy an HDTV

Vizio in Costa Mesa swears it is making money. I'm not sure how though when its 50-inch plasma – a gorgeous high-definition TV – sells for \$1,700 at Circuit City. The Vizio line is also carried at Costco, an even better place to buy TVs because of the store's outrageously tolerant return policy.

Most useful tech tool

U3 technology turns an ordinary USB key into your traveling computer profile. Plug it into a foreign computer and you can access your e-mail, instant message friends, surf the Web – and leave no trace of yourself on the PC. I liked this so much, it's been my top gift item this year. U3 storage keys come in all sizes and are available from many companies.

Best user-friendly gadget

The Pure Digital Point & Shoot camcorder, with 512-megabytes of built-in memory, was one of the easiest gadgets to figure out. Push button to record video, then flip out USB arm and plug into computer to transfer video and share with friends. I wasn't the only one impressed. I heard from several who not only bought one, but use it – always a thrill for the gadget reviewer. The price has dropped to \$100 at Target.com, which also sells a 1 GB version for \$140.